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CLAUDE ACHILLE DEBUSSY

By J. G. PROD'HOMME

Toute musique, pour peu qu'elle soit nouvelle, demande de l'habitude pour être goûtée.

—D'ALEMBERT.

SOME members of the Académie des Beaux Arts, we are told, intended to propose for the seat left vacant by the nomination of M. Charles-Marie Widor to the permanent secretaryship (his election dates from July, 1914) the composer of *Pelléas et Mélisande*—Claude Achille Debussy. Scarcely was this news given out when we learned on the twenty-seventh of last March of the composer's death—a death only too well foreseen, alas! by those who knew that Debussy had been condemned many months before.¹ The Académie des Beaux Arts has to reproach itself for action too long delayed.

Coming in these days through which we are living, this death will arouse emotion in the little world of musicians only, for the general public cares less than ever at the present time for any art but the art of war. This is but another reason for trying to trace the too short career of a composer whom the future will judge more calmly than his contemporaries and who will hold, whether people like it or not, the chief place in our musical history of this quarter of the century.

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In France, even more than in any other country except Italy, a musician wins renown only through the theatre: the name of Beethoven himself, though known for a century, did not become public property until M. Fanchois presented a piece at the Odéon; and the Orpheonic celebration of the centenary of Berlioz had to happen to make the musician of the Dauphinat known to his compatriots, as the "adaptation" of the *Damnation* to the theatre made his name known to our contemporaries; at the time of his youth, people didn't know whether he was a German or a Frenchman; Wagner, alone of modern Germans,

¹Claude Achille Debussy died at Paris, March 26, 1918; 91 years to the day after Beethoven, and at about the same age.

attracted attention in France by the failure of *Tannhäuser*, which was a pretext for opposition to the Empire; *Mimi Pinson*, afterwards *Louise*, made M. Gustave Charpentier more popular than ten symphonies would have done . . . So the name of Debussy did not become famous until the morning after the presentation of *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Opéra-Comique, April 30, 1902.

The composer was then forty years old, having been born at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, August 22, 1862. Precocious and highly gifted in music, he received his first lessons on the piano from a former pupil of Chopin, the mother of Charles de Sivry. At ten he entered the Conservatoire, where, under the direction of Lavignac and Marmontel, he carried off a number of medals and prizes for solfeggio and piano. A pupil of Franck for the organ for a time, and of Guiraud for composition, he won a second Prix de Rome in 1883,¹ and the following year, he won the first prize: the subject of the cantata was *L'Enfant Prodigue*, which concerts have since then included on their programs.² It appears that at the Institute, Gounod was one of the warm defenders of the composition.

Between times, in 1879, Debussy had made a trip to Russia where he had become initiated in a music which was still *terra incognita* to western artists. From Rome, he sent as the required works, a symphonic suite *Printemps* and a lyric poem for a woman's voice, chorus, and orchestra, *La Demoiselle élue*, after the Pre-Raphaelite poet, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. "On his return from Rome," narrates his biographer, M. Louis Laloy, "M. Debussy made the acquaintance of an old gentleman who had become a professor of music. He was an enthusiastic musician and one of the little number of the elect who then knew Moussorgski's *Boris Godounow*. It was he who played this score to M. Debussy, in its original form, before it was retouched by Rimsky-Korsakof. It was a revelation. M. Debussy had gone to Bayreuth in 1889 and had been moved to tears on hearing *Parsifal*, *Tristan* and the

¹The subject of the cantata set was the *Gladiateur* by M. Émile Moreau. M. Paul Vidal was the successful laureate of the year. "As to M. Debussy (the second prize-winner)," we read in the *Annales de la musique* de Noël and Stoullig, "he has certainly less skill, though perhaps more personality than M. Vidal. The jury has done wisely to oblige him to remain a student for another year; already greatly endowed, he will thus gain the solid instruction which he still lacks. Let us add that the young composer had, as they say, a big trump in his hand; Mlle. Krauss, herself, sang the part of Fulvia and gave it divinely. If only etiquette had not forbidden applause! The part of the bass was perfectly given by M. Taskin. It is clear that M. Debussy cannot complain of having mediocre interpreters." (*Annales*, 1883, p. 318).

²"By unanimous opinion, the contest was remarkable, and M. Debussy's score is one of the most interesting heard at the Institute for several years." (Noël and Stoullig, *Annales*, 1884, p. 378).

Master-Singers. He went back the next year to the holy city and came home disillusioned and convinced that one could not love at once two such dissimilar forms of art.¹

After the works sent from Rome, there were songs to words by various authors: Bourget, Hyspa, then Verlaine, in whom Debussy found one of his predestined poets, one of those towards whom he felt a strong affinity. The *Ariettes oubliées* of poor Lélian (1888), then the *Cinq Poèmes* of Baudelaire (1889) show with *La Demoiselle élue* the new, strange way which the young musician will hereafter follow. From the same time date works for the piano: two *Arabesques*, a *Ballade*, *Danse*, *Mazurka*, *Nocturne*, *Réverie*, *Suite Bergamasque*, *Valse romantique*. After Rossetti, Verlaine, and Baudelaire, he was inspired by Mallarmé and Pierre Louys. From the first he borrowed *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, to which he wrote a "prélude"—his masterpiece, or at least, the work most in favor with the concert public, and in any case, the work most representative of his style. From Louys, he took the *Chansons de Bilitis*, of an ultra-modern antiquity, where the declamation, the notation of a text by repeated notes followed by intervals of a third or a fourth, already anticipated *Pelléas*. Meanwhile, he wrote his string quartet, which will remain one of the masterpieces in its kind of the modern period; frequent hearings of it have made its charm and originality known and appreciated.

M. Maeterlinck had published his drama, *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1892; the young Théâtre de l'Oeuvre gave a performance of it the following year on the stage of the Bouffes Parisiens, a performance which had caused a certain alarm among Parisian critics; they found in the work of the young Belgian poet all the known theatrical situations, from Shakespeare to Courteline, taking in Feuillet, Musset, Edgar Poe, and Émile Augier! Debussy read *Pelléas*; he had found his poet and he had only to send back to Catulle Mendès a *Chimène* which he had unwisely accepted.

Little by little, thanks to the Société nationale, that useful laboratory of musical experiments, founded in 1871, the name of Debussy was spoken at every little gathering of initiates, who were for the most part writers enchanted by the art of a musician so like their own symbolism and impressionism.

¹Let us note, nevertheless, that M. Debussy did not break with Wagner quite so suddenly as his biographer asserts. When the Paris Opéra gave in 1893 the first presentation of the *Walküre*, to introduce the tetralogy to the public, M. Gailhard had the idea of giving on the day before May 12, a concert-lecture on the *Rheingold* on the stage of the Odéon. Catulle Mendès gave the lecture and many pages of the score were sung that day, accompanied by two pianists; these pianists were Raoul Pugno and Claude Debussy.

The *Prélude* to the *Après-Midi d'un Faune*, the quartet, the three *Nocturnes* (Nuages, Fêtes, Sirènes), the thirty or so songs which concerts of chamber-music made known slowly, which penetrated little by little to the salons where there was music still, thanks to the assistance of devoted artists,—all these won for Debussy a place of his own in French music. He was already known abroad, especially in Belgium, where in 1894 la Libre Esthétique had revealed him to the people of Brussels.

Through the *Revue Blanche* (where he did the musical criticism in 1901, before holding the same place on the *Gil Blas* two years later) Debussy reached readers to whom his name was still a dead letter. Like all composers, for lack of being played, he seized the occasion to make himself manifest, to spread his name and his ideas, to prepare a public, intelligent and informed, though sometimes scandalized by his more than original judgments on the great masters, for the hearing of his lyric drama, of which people were whispering for years.

Pelléas finally appeared, two years after *Louise*, which had been the only striking work given at our first lyric theatre. I mean the Opéra-Comique, for the Opéra was entirely given over to exploiting the mine of the Wagnerian works. There was a fine musical battle, such as does not often happen in musical history; this first performance of *Pelléas* marks one of the three or four great dates in ours. Nevertheless, M. Laloy tells us, "if it had depended only on M. Maeterlinck, the work would never have been given. If one had referred to the musicians of the orchestra, the management was preparing a scandalous failure . . . But they counted without the Debussyites; they came and came again, and they applauded. Success was announced, was confirmed; and soon there was an enthusiasm unexampled since Wagner."

We may say that the battle is still being fought. The "Debussyism" manifested at the theatre is henceforth part of the movement of contemporary ideas. In what exactly does it consist? First in that it breaks with accepted traditions, like every new and liberating movement, with classic tradition, as goes without saying, then, a little less, with romantic tradition, for it bears traces of the influence of Chopin and Liszt, and finally with the Wagnerian system which it claims to repudiate, although *Pelléas* is not wholly free of *leitmotiv*. It takes its authority, on the other hand, from the influence of the Russians: Moussorgsky, Borodine, and, to a less degree, Balakireff. Debussy had found in Moussorgsky, not a model, but a formula, or a form, if that is

better, which evidently was to conform to his temperament. "All the system of *Pelléas* existed already in *Boris Godounoff* a quarter of a century earlier," M. Marnold has written, "and with this system a new lyricism freed from forms and formulas; this lyricism expressed through a similar sensibility, came to flower in the work of the later Frenchman in a natural harmony which is marvellously original." Surrounded by an orchestra supple and wavelike, where the frequent division of the string quartet, with the almost constantly required application of the mute to the instruments, stifles a too brilliant sonorousness, the declamation is there conceived according to a system of repeated notes of the same length, like a perpetual recitation, very fitting to the symbolical or pseudo-Shakespearian personages of the poet. There is nothing of what we are accustomed to see and to hear in our theatres. Poem, music, all was new, strange. Debussy had really created a new sensation, or, if one prefers the expression, a new sensibility. So the appearance of *Pelléas* was considered by some as a revolution, a total subversion of music, and by others as a liberation, a setting music free from the old forms.

Let us try to explain briefly of what this emancipation consists, this renovation of forms and modes of expression in music.

Having received, like so many others, the official instruction of the Conservatoire, through the care of Ernest Guiraud, Debussy, freed from the influence of Wagner and of Franck, seeks the effect of a rare harmony, made up of surprises for the ear of unexpected transitions, of an instrumental refinement, all in little touches—impressionistic, if you will—which will plunge the hearer not into a pre-determined, dominating state of mind, the purpose of which is to suggest to him, to impose on him such or such an image, but into a sort of atonic state which the detractors of the music called stupefaction. This new speech, created by the author of *Pelléas*, is derived not only from certain foreign influences (to which may be added the too often forgotten influence of Emmanuel Chabrier) but very probably also from personal study of acoustic phenomena, natural resonance, and the "harmonics" of sounds. As is well known, the treatises on harmony divide (or used to divide) chords into consonant and dissonant; the chords of the seventh and ninth were considered dissonant, needing to be "resolved." Now, with Debussy, on the contrary, they appear as chords formed from the natural harmonics of the fundamental tone; that is, he will permit himself the chord C E G B \flat D F \sharp ; from that come richer combinations among which numerous relations will be established which appear,

not harsh nor false, but simply strange at the first hearing, and which offer an infinity of charm to modern ears, which have not been educated according to the laws of the old school. A spirit curious, investigating, meditative, and probably not at all impulsive (if we may judge at least from his work, all will and prejudice, but sincere prejudice, whatever may be said) Debussy does not stop with upsetting harmony; some one would necessarily have done that some day; he is not content with inventing new chords; he wished to break—and this was in the order—with our inalterable system of two kinds, major and minor, in which music had imprisoned itself after having rejected the last vestiges of ancient tonalities preserved in plain song. He sought for new musical “scales,” found in the far East the whole tone scale, the five note scale, etc., etc. In the field of rhythm he broke the traditional square formation which had already received rude attacks, and liberated almost to the point of license musical structure and architecture. But how many of these purely exterior innovations have been vulgarized by his flat imitators! In every score which boasts of being modern we hear the resounding, without rhyme or reason, of muted horns and trumpets, which the author of the *Nocturnes* knew how to use discreetly, or the sonority of a harp against a tremulous background of muted strings, which has become trite. Despite himself, since *Pelléas*, Debussy became the head of a “school.” “You can get a chemical analysis of certain works of Debussy’s pupils,” Willy has wittily written. “You will find only bicarbonate of the ninth with connected intervals, acetate of dissonances with sequences of major thirds, and traces of unresolved appoggiatures. . . .”

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After *Pelléas*, which was soon represented also in foreign countries (especially in Belgium and Germany) Debussy appeared more and more often on concert programs. Though he produced little, he kept his admirers breathless; his melodies, his piano music enchanted admirers of both sexes in two continents; each new hearing of an orchestral work provoked delirious enthusiasm and equally sincere hisses, which became rarer and rarer at second and third performances. For piano he published *Estampes*, *Images*, twelve *Préludes*; for voice two series of *Fêtes galantes* (of Verlaine) songs by Charles d’Orléans, by Villon, choruses by the same Charles d’Orléans in which, not content with hunting out old French texts, he sought to renew the art of the old sixteenth

century polyphonic writers; for orchestra he wrote a third series of *Images*, *Dances* (sacred and profane), his three sketches entitled *La Mer*, and finally the incidental music of d'Annunzio's *Saint-Sébastien* (1911), which was better appreciated at a concert performance than at the Châtelet. For a long time, announcements had been made of two lyric dramas, based on Edgar Poe, *le Diable dans le Beffroi* and *La Chute de la Maison Usher*, and of a pantomime for children *La Boîte à joujoux*, of an opera-ballet, arranged with Charles Morice from the *Fêtes galantes* of Verlaine. Already, the *Prélude* to *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune* and *Les Jeux* had been arranged for the stage for Nijinski the dancer.

In the *Jeux*, Nijinski imagined himself as interpreting a game of tennis, making felt even in his modern costume the rather vague thought of the poet-musician. His too naturalistic pantomime, in the *Prélude* to the *Après-midi d'un Faune*, stirred some feeling in the press,—where was heard the echo of some timid hisses, by the pens of Calmettes in *Le Figaro* and of Gaston Deschamps in *Le Temps*. "It is neither a gracious eglogue nor a profound production . . . The real public will never accept these animal realities," said the former; "Mallarmé," the critic of *Le Temps* affirmed, "would have groaned to see his work associated with gestures, mimicry, and scenes against which the good taste of Parisians decidedly revolted."

A little discussion followed. Among the eloquent voices which were raised in support of Debussy, or of his interpreter, not the least were those of Laurent Tailhade and Auguste Rodin.

"The divine Nijinski," said Tailhade, "borne on the aerial music of Claude Debussy, all whispering with wings, with leaves, all shimmering with lights like a summer's day of love, enjoyed the Sicilian nymphs, to the great confusion of that infamous prudery, unknown in France before our time. . ."

And Rodin: "No role has shown Nijinski so extraordinary as his last creation. Between mimic and plastic, the agreement is perfect; his whole body expresses what his mind wishes; he attains character by rendering fully the feeling that animates him; he has the beauty of ancient frescoes and statues; he is the ideal figure whom one wishes to sketch or to model."

This incident took place at the end of the Russian season of 1912. The preceding spring, far from accusing Debussy of scandalizing his hearers, an effort seems to have been made to make of this "exalted pagan" a religious musician, if not wholly converted, at least destined to reinvigorate the dead sacred music of France.

At the moment when the master was working hurriedly on the score of M. d'Annunzio's *Mystère de Saint Sébastien* (they say that this score was finished on the day agreed only by the collaboration of certain devoted disciples, very familiar with the Debussy manner), M. Henry Malherbe, in *Excelsior* (February 11, 1911) gathered from Debussy's lips some declarations, of which the least that can be said is that they come unexpectedly from the author of *Pelléas*:

I believe indeed in a renaissance of liturgical music. Sacred art flourishes nobly only under persecution. And since wrong is being done to the Church, as it seems [sic], I think that the atmosphere is propitious for religious scores.

For me, sacred music stops at the 16th century. The charming and spring-like souls of those days were the only ones who could express their vehement and disinterested fervor in songs free from all worldly taint. Since then pious musical improvisations have been made more or less for parade. Even the genius of that naïf and worthy man, John Sebastian Bach, did not save him. He builds edifices of harmony, like a great and devout architect, not like an apostle.

Parsifal is pretty. It is theatrical, which is poison to simplicity. Wagner himself calls his works *spectacles*. He was too well fortified against humility to celebrate religion. His attitudes are too dramatic for prayer. His proud and factitious theories never leave him.

Who will feel again the grandiose passion of a Palestrina? Who will begin again the poor and fragrant sacrifice of the little jongleur, whose story has come down to us?

For the rest, Debussy's own career as a "religious" musician is confined to d'Annunzio's mystery. His spirit doubtless was not simple enough; he found himself too far from the "state of grace" of the little jongleur. And the snobs of sacred music were destined to hope in vain.

When the war came, Debussy, already attacked by the disease which was to carry him off, confined himself to re-editing and publishing some chamber-music, some studies for piano, the first of his *Six sonatas pour divers instruments*, of which the second for flute, harp, and alto, is still unpublished. As orchestral novelty, he gave out that slight, effeminate page, affectedly entitled *Berceuse héroïque*, dedicated to the King of the Belgians. At the beginning of 1915, he was made to write—or more exactly to sign, for the entire text was written by one of his disciples—the opening article of a special number of the bulletin of the late Société internationale de musique (S. I. M., Paris section). In this page, called *Enfin seuls!*, Debussy defended once more an idea always dear to him, that of the continuity of the French

"tradition," interrupted since Rameau—which is true—and renewed by himself, as he flattered himself—which is open to discussion:

We must at last understand that victory will bring to the French musical conscience a necessary liberation. I have said this for many years; we have been false to the tradition of our race for a century and a half . . . In fact, since Rameau, we have had no clearly marked French tradition. (And after developing this theme, Debussy ends by saying that) at the moment when destiny turns the page, music must be patient and collect herself before breaking the silence that will follow the explosion of the last shell.

Other statements could be collected, even more interesting, in Debussy's critical work, as in the interviews which were generally so hard to get from him. I make only a few characteristic selections:

Music is a sum of scattered forces, (he said to a personage of his own invention, M. Croche in *Entretiens avec M. Croche*, in the *Revue blanche*, 1901) . . . People make theoretical songs of them! I prefer the few notes from the flute of an Egyptian shepherd: he collaborates with the landscape and hears harmonies unknown to our treatises. Musicians hear only the music written with clever fingers, never that which is written in nature. To see the sunrise is more useful than to hear the Pastoral Symphony. What good is your almost incomprehensible art? Ought you not to suppress these parasitic complications which make music in ingeniousness like the lock of a safe? . . . You boast because you know music only, and you obey barbarian, unknown laws! You are hailed by fine epithets and you are only rascals—something between a monkey and a valet!

But, once relieved of this paradox, Debussy, a little further on, shows us his truer, more intimate thought:

I was dreaming. Formulate oneself? Finish works? So many question-marks placed by a childish vanity, the need of getting rid at any cost of an idea with which one has lived too long; all this poorly concealing the silly mania of fancying oneself superior to others.

This doctrine of the least effort, the "of what good," which pervades certain articles—does it not also impregnate all the composer's work? Was not Debussy rather a great contemplator than a great producer, for whom the piling up of work on work, score on score, is an imperious necessity? Was he not a sort of superior dilettante, somewhat disdainful?

Before a moving sky, (he said to M. Henry Malherbe) contemplating for hours together the magnificent constantly shifting beauty, I feel an incomparable emotion. Vast nature is reflected in my literal, halting soul. Here are trees with branches spreading toward the sky, here are perfumed flowers smiling on the plain, here is the gentle earth carpeted with wild grasses. And, insensibly, the hands take the position of adoration . . . To feel the mighty and disturbing spectacles to which

nature invites ephemeral, temporary passers-by . . . that is what I call *prayer*.

From this contemplation of nature, Debussy did not indeed, as many others have done, draw descriptive symphonies, more or less objective; for him it was only an object reflected in his individual consciousness. Far from wishing to paint the gross reality or even the appearance of the real, he wished to express only the sensations he felt, the impression he received. Thus in *La Mer*, in *Nuages*; and from these sonorous hints, these resulting and tremulous sketches, emotion was to spring forth and communicate itself to the auditor—always on condition that the auditor was endowed with sensibility like that of the musician. Let us quote a few more sayings of the master on this subject.

Who will ever know the secret of musical composition? The sound of the sea, the curve of the horizon, the wind in the leaves, the cry of a bird deposit in us multiple impressions and suddenly without our consenting the least in the world, one of these memories speaks out of us and is expressed in musical language. It carries its harmony in itself. Try as we will, we cannot find a harmony more just or more sincere. Only in this way, does a heart destined to music make the most beautiful discoveries.

That is why I wish to write my musical dream with the most complete detachment from myself. I wish to sing of the inner landscape with the naive candor of childhood.

This innocent speech will not make its way with stumbling. It will always shock the partisans of artifice and falsehood. I foresee that and rejoice in it. I will do nothing to create adversaries. But I will do nothing to change adversaries into friends. One must force oneself to be a great artist for oneself and not for others. I dare to be myself and to suffer for my truth. Those who feel as I do will love me only the more for it. The others will avoid me, will hate me. I shall do nothing to conciliate them.

In truth, on the distant day—I must hope that it may come later—when I inspire no more quarrels, I shall bitterly reproach myself. In those last works, there will necessarily dominate the detestable hypocrisy which will have permitted me to satisfy everybody.

A favoring Destiny has willed that this hypothesis should not be realised, and Debussy, vanishing at an age when our musicians are still considered as “young,” did not have time to reach this stage of “detestable hypocrisy” which he feared for his old age.

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“I love music too much,” he proclaimed once, “to speak of it otherwise than passionately.” So we must not be surprised

at the bold, disrespectful judgments which he uttered equally on the gods of music, universally (and conventionally) adored, and on the consecrated reputation of his own time. We heard him just now making some concession to the "worthy man" Sebastian Bach, for whom he was, I really think, full of a certain respect. But Gluck was for him only a "pedant," not less than Wagner; he called the Tetralogie "bottin" and found Wagner's masterpieces "manufactured." Of songs of Schubert he cries, "They are inoffensive; they have the odor of bureau drawers of provincial old maids,—ends of faded ribbon—flowers forever faded and dried—out of date photographs! Only they repeat the same effect for interminable stanzas and at the end of the third one wonders if one could not set to music our national Paul Delmet." In Schumann's *Faust*, "one stumbles on Mendelssohn," Beethoven is "an old deaf man," Berlioz a "monster," César Franck "a Belgian," *La Statue* by Reyer is "grand opera bouffe," *Henry VIII* of Saint-Saëns is "grand historical opera" (which isn't bad, we must admit). Of the new Italian school and the performance of *I Pagliacci* at the Opéra in 1903, Debussy wrote: "There are jokes on which it is bad taste to insist;" elsewhere one finds in Puccini and Leoncavallo "an almost complete imitation of the manias of our most notorious master"—that is, Massenet, for whom Debussy has nowhere else a cruel word.

Summarizing the musical season of 1903 in *Gil Blas*, he regretted that there had not been performances in Paris of *The Marriage of Figaro* or of *Freyschütz*, "works which contain so many fine things for us, while *Le Toréador* (of Adolphe Adam) or similar works remind us that French music has passed through unfortunate epochs."

Those attacks in the style of a Paris street urchin which express aloud what many others, artists or critics, are silently thinking, have contributed, at least as much as his music, to Debussy's fame as an iconoclast. And with what terms, in return, his own production was described! While he found commentators, enthusiastic biographers, for whom music began with him, Debussy had always against him—I mean against his art, for I do not think that a man happy as he was had many enemies beside his confrères—he had against him a group, a great majority of unconquerable hostility.

According to M. Laloy, for example,

His music expresses primordial truths, inaccessible to the human understanding; by it are revealed to us both the life of things and our own life. It takes us back to a state of innocence, of absolute purity, and limpidity,

where the very idea of evil does not yet exist, no law having been imposed. *Before the fall*—that might be his motto.

That is very ingenious as well as enthusiastic, but the trouble is that the innocence and purity of the art of Debussy are subject to question. One cannot say of the art of a man who was familiar or could have been familiar with all the past and present schools of music, that his motto might be *Before the fall*, since he could have gone back to all the sins of musical humanity, and since, if he did sin, it was not through excess of simplicity nor from ignorance.

To my mind, (says M. Laloy again) only the music of M. Debussy and the spectacles of nature cause such suffering by force of joy and by very excess of beauty. . . . those sublime pages (he is speaking of *La Mer*) which clutch the throat like all which is superhuman. . . . We must not reproach him for not having painted a more terrifying sea. To fear is not to understand; the initiated one cannot know fear; the elements are his friends and he advances among their manifestations like a brother.

"In the evolution of music, there are few masters of genius who have achieved a progress so decisive, so bold, and so logical at the same time as that affected by the composer of *Pelléas* and the *Nocturnes*," says M. Marnold. "On the side of technique" adds M. G. Aubry (*Revue de Hollande*, September, 1916) his appearance may be compared to that of Haydn, Beethoven, Liszt, or Berlioz. There is no composer of any originality at the present time who can write as if Claude Debussy had not lived. He has delivered harmony from certain bands; he has given to instrumental music an almost unlimited suppleness." His work is "the faithful mirror of the human heart at one epoch, as were for other epochs the works of Mozart or of Chopin." (*Correspondant*, Nov. 10, 1917.)

Whether one likes it or not, indeed, Debussy has founded a school, and very rapidly, if we bear in mind that his great fame dates only from the performance of *Pelléas*. Now, as M. Georges Servières judiciously says:

It is extremely glorious for a composer to have been an innovator, an inventor of forms and a discoverer of harmonies. But if, in art, it is difficult to create anything new, it soon becomes easy for clever men to copy methods, especially when theoreticians have reduced the substance of the "modern style" to formulas, almost of text-book nature. Any student once escaped from the Conservatoire is free to scatter the ninth chords and successive fifths hitherto forbidden, to adorn every harmony with double and triple appoggiaturas resolved or not, to arrange perfect chords by fifths and fourths without any scaffolding of thirds and sixths, to

modulate on the pedal point or without pedal, to the most remote keys, to borrow the modes of plain song, the Chinese or Japanese scale, the whole-tone scale or to change our European scale. The passion of young generations for musical impressionism has given to M. Debussy a legion of very compromising imitators. Some surpass him in technical cleverness. As the copiers of Gounod and Massenet have imitated the manners of these masters to satiety, so the copiers of M. Debussy will disgust the public with his methods, from which they will take only those which are profitable to ignorance and laziness. (*Guide musical*, April 20, 1913.)

'Debussyism' (in the opinion of M. Bazaillas), is a kind of artistic 'quietism,' characterized by abandon and infinite suppleness of sensibility which can only shudder and dream, happy to give itself up, docile and half-conscious, to the charm of musical suggestion. . . . The restlessness and shuddering of modern sensibility circulate in it. . . . Besides, these shivers please me and these suggestions make me think Alongside of musical construction, there is room for this art which begins and doesn't finish, all composed of suggestion and intercession—discreet imitation to the spiritual life. In this gift of luring the dream and provoked inner emotion, M. Debussy is past master. His art is that of *musical intercession*. In truth, he will not create forms which dominate and subdue us; he will have none of the artistic dictatorship which some, in an excess of Boulangerism, seem to wish for him. Whether he wishes or not, we must see in him a *mediator* who uses tones like an inner magic, to insinuate himself into our being and to reveal us insensibly to ourselves.

For M. Camille Mauclair, less surely convinced, *Pelléas* is only "an exceptional work; a charming mediæval tapestry could not be a fresco for the future."

The composer Arthur Coquard, who was, at the time of his death, musical critic of *L'Echo de Paris*, conceded that Debussy was

a prodigious inventor of harmonies who played as no one else has done with connections between chords, with unusual resolutions and orchestral sonorities, the most refined orchestral 'chiaroscuro' . . . almost without connection with the past, without family, without ancestors.

Coquard granted beside that in the field of harmony, the worth of Debussy

is great, and among numerous bizarre passages, there frequently occur successions penetrating in their novelty, seductive in their felicitous boldness. But these beauties are all of the same sort, and all proceed from the same method; this explains why, when a short work—like *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*—charms us from beginning to end, the works of longer flight are desperately monotonous, despite certain exquisite and truly inspired passages.

This opinion of Coquard, a shrinking composer all his own life, is that of the mean and is perhaps near enough to the truth;

without denying the advance which Debussy caused his art to make, he indicates the weak point of the system, which clearly lies in the monotony, and in conclusion, he places Debussy beside his favorite poets, Mallarmé and Verlaine.

If we pass from these critics of the centre to what we may call the extreme right of opinion, we find, for example, Camille Bellaigue of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. For him, Debussy's part in musical evolution is of negligible importance. Debussy has real individuality, without doubt, but it is to be hoped that he is only accidental and that he will found no school.

That must be about the opinion of M. Saint-Saëns, who, though he has never formulated it or explained it in detail, has never concealed his aversion, I may almost say, his hatred for everything remotely connected with the new tendencies of the French school. Though, in his virulent articles since the war, he has had the good taste to observe the "union sacrée," he has not been able to refrain from telling their faults to his young colleagues without personalities:

What is shocking to-day will not be shocking to-morrow, whatever it is. That amounts to saying that we get used to anything. That's certain. We get used to nastiness, to coarseness, to cynicism, to drunkenness, to robbery, to murder. . . . Why don't we understand that there are some things we *ought not* to get used to.

When a man has reached the point where he hears with pleasure or at least with indifference false chords, inexplicable dissonances, he has become the equal of people who have, as they say, no ear; it simply proves that here as elsewhere extremes meet. (*Germanophilie*, last page.)

Aside from these pure and simple denials of all modern art, whatever its tendencies, whether of Richard Strauss or of our young French musicians, Debussy provoked certain sincere critics who were not unwilling to applaud masterpieces, but who were distracted by his sonorous inventions and his complete scorn of consecrated forms, his vividly expressed opinions. As there was composed for Richard Wagner a dictionary of abusive terms used to describe his art and his works, a similar work of more modest proportions could be made about our musician.

Degeneracy, decadence, "mystic puerility," "symbolistic obscurity," "simple repetition," "triumph of method," "musical protoplasm," "musical butterflying elevated to a principle," "a lilliputian art for an impoverished humanity"—such are the expressions collected by M. Cor in *Le Cas Debussy* (published in 1908); "simple roublardise," says some one else; "sonorous bread-crumbs" says Mr. Jean d'Udine, who believes that the musician is perfectly

sincere, while another accuses his art of bluff, his success of mystification, his public of being a "troop of snobs." "Musical hash," "kaleidoscope of notes," proclaims M. E. Cotinet; "a musical sampler" decides M. Adolphe Boschot. Others compare him to the painters Carrière and Cézanne, etc., etc.

Still, for M. Vincent d'Indy, "Debussy has kept completely true to our French musical tradition."

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"The fault of Debussy" according to one of his admirers, H. Béraud, "is to be too literary, and the nature of musicians, in general, is not to be sufficiently so." By his intellectual formation, Debussy belonged to the generation of 1885—that is to say, to the epoch of symbolism, of impressionism, of decadence; he was deeply read and very familiar with the new poetry of his time. It was the fine time of "art for art's sake," when people argued for or against free verse, when one clinched a fist over a cesura . . . our musicians, often behind their contemporaries in poetry and painting, were then slowing up the process of throwing stones at the grandiosity of Meyerbeer and throwing themselves body and soul into the Wagnerian ocean. Some, like M. Alfred Bruneau and Gustave Charpentier, following another current of the time, gave their support to the naturalistic school of Zola, seeking on this path (under the musical influence of Berlioz) to strike out the way to a popular, healthy, and vigorous art. Debussy, for his part, was of a more aristocratic essence; his art, refined to excess, lending itself to allegory, to mystery, to perpetual half-tints, is addressed only to the delicate, to the nervous, or, if you like, as his detractors would say, to the sick. . . . Influenced by the PreRaphælite Rossetti, by Verlaine and Mallarmé, then by M. Maurice Maeterlinck, he will profess a certain scorn for the crowd. He will make no concessions to it, will not seek its noisy applause; he will confess, on the occasion of the renewal of *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1914; "This gives me pleasure, certainly, but not as much as one might think. For the success—if it is success—" he added at once, "has been long in coming. The public has not taste, it will never have it." (Comœdia, Feb. 1, 1914.)

In taking him for leader of the young French school, there were found for him musical ancestors in the eighteenth century, in the persons of Rameau, the Couperins, and our old Clavecinists. Was not this going back a little far? In any case, it is truthfully asserted that since Gluck, coming through Spontini, Rossini, and

Meyerbeer who filled our nineteenth century until the late arrival of Wagner—and through the successors of a Monsigny, of a Grétry, of a Méhul—that our ancient school has been quite forgotten at the theatre, and that only the exceptional symphonies of a Berlioz (which had no influence on his contemporaries) could link together this tradition, interrupted and totally diverted by the German influence. But it may be questioned whether the reform of Debussy has quite brought us back.

This reform was certainly needed, since it has happened. Could another man have accomplished it, or even have tried it? The experiments of a Fanelli, discovered a few years ago by M. Pierné, make us believe that it was in the air; but from that stage to a workable realization, to a creation as artistic as that of a Debussy, there is some distance—such a distance as, for example, separates a Marschner from a Wagner. We can see also a precursor in the person of M. Erik Satie, whose *Gymnopédies* were once orchestrated by Debussy. But Erik Satie, before completing his musical education at the Schola Cantorum just before the war, was, twenty or twenty-five years ago, merely a person who put together strange chords, who wrote some pages for *Le Fils de l'Étoile*, a “Chaldean Wagnerism” of M. Joséphin Péladan (le Sar Péladan, as he called himself then) and who recently has composed some collections with truculent titles: *Véritables Préludes flasques*; *Embryons desséchés*; *Descriptions automatiques*.

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There are, as a matter of fact, no schools. What is the school of Lulli, of Rameau, of Gluck or of Mozart, of Weber, of Wagner, of Meyerbeer or of Massenet? History answers. There are individualities, temperaments more or less pronounced, geniuses who give to art impulses to “progress” which people think can be erected into a system, codified in abstract and lifeless formulas. They sum up, they express forever the ideas or the feelings of a period, of a moment in history. Posterity piously preserves their memory and finds pleasure or edification in reading, looking at, or hearing their works. And that is all. Their followers only adopt their methods and their formulas, break up their style into small change, for the use of the crowd, often with more immediate success than that of the masters.

Was Debussy one of these geniuses allied with the gods? It is too soon to decide. Was he the annunciator of a new art, or, coming at a certain period, has he given it realization forever?

Very perspicacious would he be, who could answer these questions at the moment when he disappeared forever.

One day (it was in the month of May, 1910) when I went to ask him if he believed in a renaissance of the classic ideal, I heard him express himself with a circumspection, I may almost say a respect, which surprised me in the former critic of the *Revue blanche* and *Gil Blas*. The request which was made of him rather astonished him, and the remarks which he made to me, with a somewhat detached air, as of a man called away from many interests, may be summed up thus: "Every artist has his temperament: art is always progressive; it cannot then return to the past, which is definitely dead. Only imbeciles and cowards look backwards. . . . In conclusion: Let us work!"

(Translated by Marguerite Barton)